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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 TUNIS 000075

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TAGS: PTER SOCI PINR TS  
SUBJECT: 2006/2007 TERROR CELL IN TUNISIA: WHAT HAPPENED  
AND WHY

REF: A. 07 TUNIS 1620  
B. 07 TUNIS 154 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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11. (S/NF) A new narrative is emerging about the chain of events culminating in the December 2006/January 2007 disruption by Tunisian security forces of a terror cell in the southern suburbs of Tunis (Reftels). The new information derives from the public "Soliman trial," in which 30 Tunisians were convicted of terrorism-related offenses, 2000 pages of evidentiary documents made available to defense lawyers (which we obtained), EmbOff discussions with defense attorneys, and media reporting. While we do not present this new information as fact, it does help paint a fuller picture about how the terror cell came into being, how it sustained itself, eluded capture for months, and grew in size. However imperfect, this information can help us understand the dynamics at play in the spread of violent extremism in Tunisia.

12. (S/NF) In this cable, we offer a summary timeline of the events, based on this new information, along with observations on implications. Of particular note:

-- The original six members of the cell crossed into Tunisia from Algeria in April, 2006. The group reportedly planned to launch attacks against "vital infrastructure," "symbolic targets," "foreign interests," and "Tunisian and foreign figures" (nfi). There was no mention in the court-provided documents of plans to attack the US or UK Embassies or personnel.

-- The group was armed with six Kalashnikov rifles, one of which did not work, some magazines, a few grenades, and walkie-talkies. The group later manufactured explosives.

-- On the run after the capture of two members, the group of four was able to enlist support from Islamist sympathizers in Sidi Bouzid, the greater Tunis area, and Sousse. In the course of a six-week period, the group mushroomed to 40.

-- Those who were convicted in the Soliman trial told their defense lawyers that the top motivation for their actions was the war in Iraq. Several had aspired to join the "resistance" there. Because of the logistical difficulties of doing so, they opted for "jihad" in Tunisia instead. In addition, all 30 of the Soliman defendants harbored

grievances against the Tunisian state and its repressive security regime.

We will report in detail septel on factors contributing to increased popular support in Tunisia for violent ideologies, as well as on GOT countermeasures. End Summary.

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Information Windfall Sheds Light  
on Dec 2006/Jan 2007 Events  
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¶3. (S/NF) In the aftermath of the December 2007 trial ("the Soliman trial") in which 30 Tunisians were convicted of various terrorism-related offenses (Ref A), and the court's release to defense attorneys of some 2000 pages of evidence, a copy of which the Embassy has obtained, there is now a great deal of information about these events in the public domain. In addition, EmbOffs have had lengthy conversations with several of the attorneys representing those convicted in this case. These attorneys shared their impressions about the events in question and the motivations of those involved, based on both their reading of the court documents and interviews with their clients. Meanwhile, the January 6 issue of Jeune Afrique magazine carried a four-page article on the incidents. The article was based on court documents and interviews with several of the same defense lawyers.

¶4. (S/NF) While some of this information tracks with information provided to GRPO through liaison channels, the sheer volume of information now at our disposal far eclipses that which has been shared officially. We do not present this new information as fact. Indeed, defense lawyers complain that the 2000-page dossier to which they had access

TUNIS 00000075 002 OF 004

was incomplete. One lawyer, noting instances in which the judge referred to documentation that was not included in the file, exclaimed: "It's as if the judge had access to a different file!" Moreover, the defense attorneys' understanding of the events in question may be colored by their own individual biases or the subjective understandings of their clients. Even so, we believe this new information helps paint a picture of the events leading up to the Soliman shoot-outs.

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Timeline of Events  
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¶5. (C) While it is possible to reconstruct at least parts of the chain of events leading to the December 2006/January 2007 disruption of the terror cell, even one of the defense attorneys who had spent hours reading court documents and interviewing clients told EmbOffs that it is still impossible to re-construct an exact sequence of events. With that caveat, a rough timeline follows:

-- Spring, 2006: The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, which has since affiliated with al-Qaeda and become known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb -- AQIM) instructed Lassaad Sassi to infiltrate Tunisia to recruit and train terrorists and develop a network for logistic support.  
(Note: According to Jeune Afrique, Sassi was a Tunisian national who previously served in the National Guard. He was also described as a former fighter in Bosnia who had received military training in al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan before joining the GSPC. In a letter to the editor in the January 13th issue of Jeune Afrique, the Tunisian Ambassador to France disputed that Sassi had ever served in the National Guard. End Note.) According to court documents, the group reportedly planned to launch attacks against vital infrastructure, symbolic targets, foreign interests, and Tunisian and foreign figures (nfi). There was no mention in the court-provided documents of plans to attack the US or UK Embassies or personnel. At one point in the trial the judge

asked one of the defendants about plans to attack the US and UK Embassies, but the defendant denied knowledge of any such plans.

-- April 22-23, 2006: Lassaad Sassi, together with four Tunisians (Mohamed Hedi Ben Khliifa, Zouhair Riabi, Mohamed Mahmoudi, and Tarak Hammami), as well as a Mauritanian (Mohammadou Maqam Maqam, aka "Chokri") crossed the border from Algeria into Tunisia on foot, settling at Djebel Chaambi, Tunisia's highest mountain, near Kasserine, after four days of walking. They were reportedly armed with six Kalashnikov rifles, some magazines, a few grenades, and walkie-talkies.

-- Late April, 2006: Hammami and Mahmoudi left the encampment to seek food supplies and to ask a family member to help them find safe lodging. Police arrested the two men, who were said to be carrying two grenades and a small amount of money.

-- May, 2006: Having surmised that two members had been arrested, the remaining four departed Djebel Chaambi. After unsuccessfully trying to find shelter in Sidi Bouzid, the group enlisted the help of traveling salesman Wael Ammami to relocate to the greater Tunis area. They stayed with Majdi el-Amri and Sahbi el-Masrouki, two members of a "Salafist" cell in Tunis.

-- Beginning June, 2006: The group relocated to Hammam-Lif, a suburb approximately 15 km south of Tunis.

-- Summer, 2006: Some cell members drove to Kasserine to retrieve weapons from a cache in the surrounding mountains. They were assisted by three students from the Higher Institute for Technological Studies at Sidi Bouzid. The members returned to Hammam Lif by bus, carrying the weapons in gym bags.

-- Summer/Autumn, 2006: The group expanded to 20 members, changing locations in the southern Tunis suburbs of Hammam-Lif, Ez-Zahra, and Hammam-Chott to avoid detection. Sassi began training cell members in handling of AK-47s and the production of explosives with locally available items.

-- November, 2006: A group of 15 members of a "Salafist" group from Sousse, led by Mokhles Ammar and Hassanin el-Aifa,

TUNIS 00000075 003 OF 004

fled to a cave in the Ain Tbornog mountain range near Grombalia, about 45 km south of Tunis. Some of the "Sousse group" had given up their dreams of becoming "jihadists" in Iraq, having discovered the difficulties of traveling to Iraq. Instead, they decided to do battle within Tunisia. This group had planned at one point to raid a Central Bank office in Sousse to seize the weapons of two policemen who guarded the office.

-- December, 2006: The 15 members of a Sousse group joined the Sassi group, which had already incorporated members from Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, and Tunis. Guided by Makram Jrid, the son of a shepherd who knew the region well, some 24 men set up a camp in the Ain Tbornog mountains, a five-hour walk from the nearest road. The encampment included four tents under cover of dense trees.

-- December 23, 2006: A small group of men stayed at a hide-out in Hammam Chott, where they guarded explosives, food supplies, and cash. Police arrested Makram Jrid, of the Sousse group. He confessed details about the Hammam Chott safe house and the role of traveling salesman Wael Ammami, who was arrested the same day.

-- December 23-24, 2006: Security forces surrounded the Hammam Chott safe house. Those inside refused to surrender, instead opening fire, wounding at least three policemen. The two terrorists who were firing at security forces (Zouhair

Riabi and Majdi el-Amri) were killed, and a third was arrested. A fourth reportedly escaped. Police confiscated two AK-47s, 315 cartridges and several thousand dinars.

-- December 24, 2006: The Tunisia-Africa Press Agency (TAP) issued a statement reporting on a confrontation between police and a group of "dangerous criminals."

-- December 28, 2006: The Army and National Guard began to conduct search operations in Ain Tbornog mountain range. Makram Jrid reportedly accompanied the military troops to lead them to the encampment, but he is said to have escaped under the guise of saying his prayers. He reportedly reached the encampment ahead of the military. Sassi's group, armed with four AK-47s, a few thousand rounds of ammunition, grenades, and home-made bombs, reportedly held defensive positions until nightfall.

-- December 29, 2006: Sassi divided his men into four groups. Two groups of 15 men, led by Mokhles Ammar and Taoufik Lahouimdi, were instructed to retreat toward Sousse and await further instruction. Two other groups of a dozen each were told to take refuge in Tunis. Sassi reportedly kept with him all of the experienced fighters, who were armed with AK-47s and took command of the first group.

-- End December 2006/Beginning January 2007: In a series of clashes with security forces, most of the experienced fighters resisted: Hassanin el-Aifa blew himself up at the time of his arrest, causing the death of an army officer. Sabeur Ragoubi reportedly threw a grenade at security forces at the time of his arrest, but it did not explode. (He was sentenced to death in the trial.) Rabia Basha and Mohammadou Maqam Maqam (aka "Chokri" -- the Mauritanian) fled to the home of Bacha's parents in Soliman. Police were waiting and a shoot-out ensued, in which both terrorists were killed. Five others (Mohamed Hedi Ben Khliifa, Sahbi el-Masrouki, Makram Jrid, Mehdi el-Mejri, and Riadh Miri), armed with two AK-47s, grenades, and hand-made explosives, took refuge in a house under construction on the outskirts of Soliman. Security forces surrounded the house, and a shoot-out ensued, killing all of the terrorists. The other inexperienced members did not offer resistance, and represent the bulk of the 30 sentenced on December 30.

-- January 3, 2007: Sassi was reportedly killed in a shoot-out at daybreak.

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Motivations and Dynamics  
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¶6. (C) When asked about the terrorists' motivations, defense lawyers told EmbOffs that the number one motivation -- without exception -- was the war in Iraq. Several of the terrorists had reportedly aspired to join the "resistance" in Iraq. Deterred by the logistical difficulties of doing so, engaging in "jihad" in Tunisia became their next option.

TUNIS 00000075 004 OF 004

Defense lawyers also noted that all 30 of the Soliman defendants harbored grievances against the Tunisian state and its repressive security regime, whether due to a personal experience of perceived harassment, or that of a loved one, prior to being radicalized. One lawyer said many of the defendants had no opportunity to discuss political or religious issues with official or private Tunisians. When his lawyer began a discussion about his actions, the client asked, "Why did I never have an opportunity to talk to someone before (I was arrested)?"

¶7. (C) Asked about the socio-economic status of the convicted terrorists, defense lawyers explained that there was not a set profile. Many of the Soliman defendants had been employed as skilled or semi-skilled tradesmen. (One was an ironworker, for example.) Some had been students and seemed

to have been recruited as a group among reported "sympathizers." Lawyers also noted that some of the terrorists were married, with children.

¶18. (C) Defense lawyers expressed concern about the apparent ease with which the Sassi terror cell managed to recruit members and cultivate a support network. Specifically, in the space of a six-week period, the group was said to mushroom from 4 members (after the arrest of two in Kasserine) to 40. By the same token, Sassi managed to feed and shelter some 40 men at the group's height. Clearly, this was accomplished with the assistance of a much broader network of sympathizers. One defense lawyer told PolCouns that, based on the patterns of GOT detentions of suspected Islamists, he was certain that the GOT was still working to identify all of those who fell into this support category.

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Comment  
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¶19. (C) However subjective and imperfect this new information about the Soliman terror cell, we believe it can help us understand the dynamics at play in the spread of violent extremism in Tunisia. We will report in detail septel on the factors contributing to increased popular support in Tunisia for violent ideologies, as well as on the effectiveness of GOT countermeasures. End Comment.

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